



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE ELEVENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

AUGUST 13, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Twice in our lives, Jo and I have been to Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. It is by far the spookiest place we have ever been. The atmosphere seemed laced with the weight of the atomic bomb's impact on humanity and history, as well as the moral ambiguity that ultimately tortured the bomb's creator, Robert Oppenheimer.

General Groves apparently once asked Oppenheimer, "Are you saying that there's a chance that when we push that button... we destroy the world?" And Oppenheimer responds, "The chances are near zero..." Says Groves, "Near zero?" And Oppenheimer responds, "What do you want from theory alone?" And Groves' replies, "Zero would be nice!"

Some prominent theologians have argued that it is not the province of science to explain or justify the Christian faith.¹ But wouldn't we love to have some scientific corroboration of our faith!

That is a vain hope. Both our scientific knowledge of the universe and our theological understanding of God today remain provisional. As Paul says in Chapter 13 of 1st Corinthians:

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology, an Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, Blackwell 2001) 305, citing Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, ... We always will see only through a glass darkly.²

And responsible scientists would agree that our knowledge of the universe is just as incomplete. Nobel Prize Winner Richard Feynman once suggested that we might not even fully understand the laws of physics ... He also famously said that “I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics.”³

But at the same time, it is too easy and too convenient for those who seek to discount and diminish religion to insist on an inevitable conflict between science and religion. Yes, science and religion travel distinct paths. The scientist asks “how?” The theologian asks “why?” The scientist explains nature. The theologian deals with the origin and purpose of nature in the first place.⁴ Astronomers and physicists and astronauts ask about life on other planets. Theologians consider the implications.⁵

² 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NRSV).

³ Richard Feynman, the Physicist Who Didn't Understand his Own Theories,” Openmind BBVA, May 11, 2018, <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/science/leading-figures/richard-feynman-the-physicist-who-didnt-understand-his-own-theories/> (accessed August 10, 2023). And just last Thursday, another experiment brought “physicists one step closer to figuring out if there are more types of matter and energy composing the universe than have been accounted for. Katrine Miller, “Physicists Move One Step Closer to a Theoretical Showdown,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.energy.gov/science/doe-explainsthe-higgs-boson> (accessed August 10, 2023). Even Lawrence Krause, author of *A Universe from Nothing*, admits that “we may never have enough empirical information to resolve [whether our universe came from nothing] unambiguously.” Lawrence M. Krause, *A Universe from Nothing* (New York: Atria 2012) xxiii.

⁴ McGrath 306.

⁵ Indeed, the Vatican conducted a “five-day conference that gathered astronomers, physicists, biologists and other experts to discuss the budding field of astrobiology - the study of the origin of life and its existence elsewhere in the cosmos...[that] focused on the scientific perspective and how different disciplines can be used to explore the issue. CBS News, “Vatican Considers Possibility of Aliens,” November 11, 2009, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/vatican-considers-possibility-of-aliens/> (accessed August 10, 2023).

But each can and does inform the other. The influential French Jesuit paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin contended:

... [N]either science nor faith has succeeded in discrediting its adversary. On the contrary, it becomes obvious that neither can develop normally without the other. And the reason is simple: the same life animates both.⁶

Theologians and scientists alike exist by God's providence.

Theologians and scientists alike are hounded by the promptings of the same Holy Spirit. Theologians and scientists alike in their own way, know it or not, are driven by a passionate interest in making the world a better place, which we call the Kingdom of God.⁷

Sadly, however, the supposed conflict between science and religion remains entrenched in some corners of our culture, often more deeply rooted in sociological and even political differences than any genuine divergence between the scientific and theological disciplines.⁸

For example, creation and evolution left controversy behind in theological circles long ago because no fundamental dissonance exists between science and Christian theology in either case.⁹

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London, Collins 1959) 284.

⁷ Physicist Lawrence Krause observes that "the creativity and persistence of humans" – which we might consider God-given and which has led to the explosion of scientific knowledge – is "worth celebrating." Krause xvi.

⁸ See, e.g., McGrath 307 and Henry M. Morris, *Scientific Creationism* (1974); J. Berry, "Evolution," *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*. Adrian Hastings, et al., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 225.

⁹Berry 224-225.

Scientific knowledge of creation easily meshes with our theology, which portrays God as a master builder in creation.

And science tells us that God did a fantastic job. The precision with which creation was crafted is mind-boggling. For example:

The nuclear weak force is 10^{28} times the strength of gravity. Had the weak force been slightly weaker, all the hydrogen in the universe would have been turned to helium.¹⁰

And we might think that the consequence would have been that we all would “sounding like this when we talked.” But in reality, without hydrogen, no water. No water. No us. In fact, no life at all.

Thus, science tells us that the world exists because the basic physical relationships are quite precise. But in no way does this undermine our understanding of God as creator. In fact, it fits quite well with our understanding of God’s mastering of chaos and ordering of the world.¹¹

Evolution also synchs nicely with our theology, and vice versa. As Francis S. Collins, the head of the Human Genome Project, and a person of faith, has observed not only that the scientific evidence for evolution is overwhelming, but also that evolution might be “God’s elegant plan for creating humankind.”¹² And Frederick Temple the

¹⁰ Patrick Glynn, *God: The Evidence* (New York, Three Rivers Press: 1997, 1999) 29-30, quoting John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989) 37-38. The weak force is responsible for interactions between subatomic particles – the tiny particles that are the building blocks for matter, like protons, neutrons, and electrons. <https://universe.nasa.gov/universe/forces>.

¹¹ McGrath 297.

¹² Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2006) 146. Even B.B. Warfield, an “unreserved apologist for the authority and inerrancy of the Bible, wrote that evolution could supply a tenable ‘theory of the method of divine providence’ in the creation of mankind. Berry 225.

archbishop of Canterbury in 1900 asserted that “God made the laws which produced evolutionary change.”¹³

And lest we have any doubt about evolution, consider how we look and act and realize that we share 98.4 per cent of our DNA (or genes) with chimpanzees.¹⁴ And our dogs were horrified to learn that we share about 90 per cent of our DNA with them.¹⁵

Experience might suggest that, as Catholic theologian Karl Rahner observed, “things begin to go wrong when scientists start playing at being theologians, and vice versa, in that they refuse to respect the distinctive characteristics and limitations of their respective disciplines.”¹⁶ Thus, religion betrays itself in usurping the province of science. For example, one reason young Christians – these are the kids that have been to Sunday school, by the way – drop out of church and/or organized religion is because they see religion as “anti-science,” rendering faith and science incompatible.¹⁷

We should not let faith dictate science.

Or let science diminish faith.

Zero uncertainty might be nice, but faith always will demand a leap, though, perhaps, a leap that offers a “near zero” chance of falling in the abyss.

¹³ *Id.* 224.

¹⁴ Collins 146.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ McGrath 306.

¹⁷ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me (Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church...And Rethinking Faith)*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011) 92-93.